

VIDEO

FAQ

Q How powerful a PC do I need to play back HD video smoothly?

A This is a tough question to answer as there's a wide variety of video resolutions, file formats, data rates and compression techniques. However, h.264-encoded HD DVD and Blu-ray movies are the toughest to play back smoothly, so these seem to be a good target to aim for.

It's still hard to provide a precise minimum specification, as it's hard to predict the bit rate of future discs or the increasing efficiency of playback software. As a rough guide, we'd recommend a 1.8GHz Core 2 Duo or 2.2GHz Athlon X2 processor. You'll also need a fairly new graphics card, such as an ATI Radeon X1000 series or Nvidia Geforce 7 or 8 series. This card should be PCI-Express and have at least 256MB of RAM. You'll need the most recent version of your preferred DVD software, such as CyberLink PowerDVD 6.5 or InterVideo WinDVD 7.5.

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TOP UP TV Top Up TV DTR

★★★★★

£170 inc VAT (includes connection fee)

The Top Up TV service has been around since 2004, and offers additional subscription channels on Freeview that are usually available only to Sky and Virgin customers. Now the company has ditched most of the live channels, providing the programming as TV-on-demand as part of its Anytime service, which requires this Top Up TV Digital TV Recorder (DTR).

The system works by storing programmes that are specially transmitted between 2am and 8am, and sorted into 19 channels including UK TV Gold, MTV and Nickelodeon. You can't watch these programs live; instead, they accumulate on the DTR's hard disk, and amount to around 90 hours of programming a week. The programmes are automatically replaced after one week, unless you specifically save them. A week's worth of recordings takes up a lot of disk space, leaving just 20 hours of free space for your own recordings. However, you can free up more space by de-activating the channels you don't watch. Picture quality from the on-demand programmes was very good, and they didn't appear to have been overly compressed.

Top Up TV remains a subscription service and costs £9.99 per month for the basic service and an optional £7 per month for the PictureBox movie service. When you buy the box, you have to pay a one-off connection fee of £30, which includes your first month's viewing. You can also subscribe to Sentanta Sports as a live channel for £11 per month. The channel will show 46 live Premiership matches next season.

The Top Up TV DTR is also a capable Freeview receiver. It has twin digital tuners, so you can watch one channel while recording another or record two channels at



once. You can watch any recordings you've made or on-demand programmes while you're recording. The only drawback is that recording two channels between 2am and 8am means the on-demand programmes can't be downloaded. With little on at these times, though, it's unlikely you'd want to do this. Unlike Humax's Duovision (see 'Also consider...' below right), you can't watch a third programme on the same multiplex while recording two others.

The Top Up TV DTR's interface feels similar to the straightforward Sky+ system. However, the timeline EPG isn't quite as easy to navigate as the Duovision's and is a little sluggish. You can choose to record a whole series with a single button press, though, which the Duovision won't let you do.

The rear of the box has all the connectors you'll need, including two SCART sockets in case you still feel the need to use a video recorder. There's a coaxial digital output as well, but this is of limited use as

Freeview broadcasts are limited to stereo sound.

It's a good PVR at a very reasonable price, and it was hard to choose between this and our long-running favourite, the Duovision. In the end, it's the slightly lower price and flexibility provided by the subscription card slot that makes this our new favourite PVR.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Subscription service-ready
- ✓ No commitment to subscribe
- ✗ Sluggish EPG

HARD DISK RECORDER 2x digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, RF output, 2x SCART sockets, S-video, composite, stereo phono and coaxial S/PDIF output
SUPPLIER Top Up TV 08700 543210
DETAILS www.topuptv.com

Also consider...

SLINGMEDIA Slingbox

★★★★★

£150 inc VAT



The Slingbox allows you to watch television anywhere in the world, as if you were sitting in your own living room. It has SCART and S-video inputs, so you can plug in whichever set-top boxes you want. It's simple to use, and even includes onscreen mock-ups of your remote controls.

This is a great product that's essential if you can't live without your TV.



VIDEO-STREAMING DEVICE SCART and S-video inputs, Freeview tuner, IR transmitter, 10/100 Ethernet port
PART CODE SB150-110 SUPPLIER www.pcworld.co.uk DETAILS www.slingmedia.com
✓ Works well with set-top boxes; easy to set up ✗ Can't timeshift Freeview FULL REVIEW Sep 2006

FREECOM DVB-T USB Stick

★★★★★

£23 inc VAT

This was the best digital USB tuner in our Labs test in *Shopper* October 2006. It's easy to get up and running and found all the expected Freeview TV and radio channels. Video quality from our rooftop aerial was very good. There's an excellent EPG, so it's easy to plan your viewing and schedule recordings. Sadly, the included mini remote can't control the EPG, having just basic buttons for changing the channel and volume.

Still, at £28 including VAT, you won't find a cheaper or simpler way of watching and recording Freeview TV on your computer.



USB DIGITAL TV TUNER USB Hi-Speed interface, RF input
PART CODE 25451 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.freecom.com ✓ Good value; good EPG ✗ Poor remote control FULL REVIEW Oct 2006

PANASONIC SDR-H20

★★★★

£375 inc VAT

The SDR-H20 is the first hard disk camcorder we've seen from Panasonic. The company calls it a hybrid camcorder, as it can also store video on SD cards. The 30GB hard disk holds seven hours of footage at the highest quality setting of 9Mbit/s. This is the equivalent of seven MiniDV tapes or 21 8cm DVD-R discs, so it should be sufficient for a two-week holiday. If you run out of space, the SD memory card slot is compatible with SDHC cards, which have capacities of up to 8GB.

The hard disk camcorders we've seen in the past have been slimmer than MiniDV models. However, the SDR-H20 is fairly large despite having no viewfinder and an externally mounted battery. The battery has only a 60mAh capacity, but it lasted for an impressive hour and three-quarters of continuous recording. A separate charger is provided so you can charge a spare battery while using the camcorder.

The lack of a viewfinder means you must use the LCD screen to frame your shots. It's a 2.7in screen with 123,000 pixels, which is fairly standard on a camcorder at this price. It's bright and colours are well re-created. The menu system is easy to use, with the small thumb stick making navigation easy.

The camcorder is comfortable to hold, and all the controls are easy to reach. There's an AV output supporting S-video, composite and phono, and you can play clips by simply selecting a thumbnail on the display. A USB port lets you



connect to a PC, and once you've installed the software you can easily access the video files on the hard disk. There's also a one-touch DVD copy feature that writes all your video files to a blank disc using your PC's DVD writer.

The traditional clip-on lens cap is disappointing, as similarly priced MiniDV models use automatic lens covers. However, there is a big 32x zoom for distant subjects and optical image stabilisation to help keep your shots steady. The latter is particularly useful as electronic stabilisation would use up part of the already small 1/3in CCD.

The quality of recorded video is respectable for the size of the CCD. It's roughly equivalent to the best budget MiniDV camcorders. Objects are fairly well defined and colours are true to life, but there's always some noise in the picture and this becomes much heavier in low-light conditions. The noise is softened by the MPEG2 video compression, but this can also obscure fine detail.

Despite being well designed and having a great battery life, the SDR-H20 is hard to recommend. MiniDV and DVD camcorders with far better video quality are available for less. If you really want a hard disk camcorder, we'd recommend spending a little more and getting a model with a larger CCD.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Seven hours of video
- ✓ Great battery life
- ✗ Low-quality video

HD CAMCORDER 30GB hard disk, 32x optical zoom, 1/3in 800,000 pixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, S-video, composite and phono output, USB2 interface
 PART CODE SDR-H20EB-S
 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
 DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



CHOOSING A... DV Camera

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

CCD: 800,000 pixels
ZOOM: 10x optical/300x digital
VIDEO PORTS: FireWire out, S-video out
MONITORING: Mono viewfinder, 2.7in colour LCD
MEDIA: MiniDV tape
STILLS CAPTURE: 640x480 to tape
EXTRAS: Remote control
 Recommended minimum in grey

1 If you just want to make home movies, a £200 digital video (DV) camera with the specs shown above will be fine. A range of auto-exposure modes will ensure you get decent results in all conditions. The LCD screen provides easy playback on location, while the remote control allows for comfortable viewing on the sofa. If you'll be using the zoom a lot, concentrate on the optical zoom specification. Check the battery life, which should preferably be 90 minutes or more, and consider budgeting for an extra battery.

2 To edit video, get a model that provides DV-in. You can transfer edited footage back to MiniDV tape and run off VHS copies through the camera's S-video out. Cameras with S-video in can often be used to capture analogue video.

3 Enthusiasts will pay extra for a more flexible camera. Good manual focus and a colour viewfinder make for better camerawork, an external microphone transforms your audio and good battery and charger options keep you filming for longer. A high-resolution CCD might improve video quality, but while this and a flash memory slot will make your DV camera double as a digital camera, quality will be basic. For the best-quality video, look for a model with three CCDs. This gives more realistic colour reproduction and reduces picture noise to a minimum.

4 Miniature DV cameras, especially those that use tiny MicroMV tapes or memory cards, may tempt gadget-lovers, but picture quality could be compromised. Cameras that replace tape with a hard disk or DVD are more useful, making your footage more manageable.

5 If you're serious about film-making, £1,500 buys you a DV camera with superb optics, three CCDs and the requisite connectors to attach equally expensive professional AV accessories. High Definition camcorders are available, and worth considering if you have an HD TV.

TERRATEC Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity

★★★★★

£79 inc VAT



This USB TV tuner uses diversity to take a signal from two tuners and aerials to improve reception in areas with weak signal strength. Alternatively, you can use the tuners independently to receive one programme while recording another.

The included software is easy to use, image quality is good, and the remote control is clearly labelled. It's the best dual tuner we've seen.

USB TV TUNER USB2 interface, dual digital tuners, 2x RF inputs
 PART CODE 10456 SUPPLIER www.pixmania.co.uk DETAILS http://uk.terratec.net
 ✓ Twin tuners with diversity; can schedule two recordings at once
 ✗ No timeline EPG FULL REVIEW Oct 2006



HUMAX Duovisio PVR-9200T

★★★★★

£173 inc VAT

The Duovisio has twin digital tuners to receive Freeview broadcasts, so you can watch one programme while recording another, or record two programmes at once.

The 160GB hard disk can hold around 100 hours of recorded shows and enables you to pause and rewind live TV. Its interface makes it easy to browse channels and schedule recordings from the one-week EPG. The only disappointment is in its inability to schedule entire series as you can with Sky+. Otherwise, it's a great buy.

HARD DISK RECORDER Two digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, two SCART, RF, composite, stereo phono, optical S/PDIF output, USB PART CODE PVR-9200T SUPPLIER www.martindawes.net DETAILS www.humaxdigital.com/uk
 ✓ Twin digital tuner; easy-to-use interface
 ✗ Minor scheduling problems FULL REVIEW Jun 2006

